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ABSTRACT

Public education is facing a crisis of major proportions, but the things that are basically wrong with schools are not those being emphasized in current proposals for change. This paper identifies two basic defects in the American system of public education: (1) there is too little attention to individual differences; and (2) there is too much compulsion. Because of the wide range of abilities among children, the U.S. system of organizing schools by age groups is perhaps the worst possible strategy for maximizing the learning of individuals. This system, along with the "social promotion" that almost necessarily follows, results in widening gaps between students, disillusionment of those who lack the basic skills to build on in the higher grades, and boredom for the gifted students. Problems of classroom management that are customarily blamed on teachers or students are actually the fault of this "lockstep" age-grade system. Similarly, compulsory attendance laws tend to undermine the motivation on which mastery of a reasonably demanding secondary curriculum depends. Accordingly, the author makes the following suggestions for changes in our educational system: (1) provide competency tests for individuals at any age at which they are ready to take them; (2) make primary, but not secondary, education compulsory, and compel students to go to school only until they can meet the basic competency tests; (3) diversify secondary schools and make them as attractive as possible to motivate students to continue; (4) organize grade schools by curriculum level rather than by age; (5) mobilize community resources to provide a wide range of educational experiences at the secondary level; (6) maximize educational opportunities for persons of all ages. (TE)

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A PROPOSAL FOR REORGANIZING AMERICAN PUBLIC EDUCATION

Leona E. Tyler

Public education in the United States is facing a crisis, perhaps more of a crisis than anyone yet realizes--legislators, school boards, teachers, pupils, or parents. In the first place, it is becoming apparent that citizens are not willing to pay for what they are getting from schools. Repeatedly budgets are turned down and schools are forced to close temporarily for lack of funds. Secondly, one research study after another points out that the achievement of boys and girls who go through our school systems is far from satisfactory. The aims of universal education are not being reached for large numbers of young people. Thirdly, within the schools themselves there is widespread disaffection; teachers leave the profession; students drop out as soon as the law allows.

I began my teaching career as a junior high school teacher. After several years in this occupation, I returned to graduate school, obtained a Ph.D., and from then on served on a university faculty until my retirement. I am a psychologist who has specialized in Individual Differences and Counseling. Throughout my university faculty years I maintained a strong interest in the public schools, teaching courses required in the preparation of teachers, training school counselors, and carrying out research on adolescents. I have come to the conclusion that the things that are basically wrong with our public schools are <u>not</u> those being emphasized in current proposals for change. I shall explain first what I think these basic defects are, and then indicate the directions we must move in order to correct them.

The two most important things wrong are: (1) There is too little recognition of or attention to individual differences, and (2) There is too much compulsion. Few people are aware of the enormous range of mental ability in any one age group. Our system of organizing schools by age groups is perhaps the worst possible strategy for maximizing the learning of individuals. There is no dearth of evidence of such variability. Over

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the years there have been repeated surveys using standardized tests. The trouble is that neither the public nor the school authorities pay much attention to the spread of scores in a single age-grade group. They focus only on the averages. For example, in the study the media are reporting at the time this is being written (September 1985), entitled The Reading Report Card, carried out by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a comparison is made of average scores of school children in 1971 and 1985--children aged 9, 13, and 17. News stories point out the fact that the averages have improved somewhat. Some concern is expressed that 36 percent of the 9-year-olds and 40 percent of the 13-year-olds have not acquired the basic comprehension skills necessary for success at their grade level, and 16 percent of the 17-year-olds lack the skills needed for most of what is studied in a sixth or seventh grade class, to say nothing of high school. What reporters never seem to realize is that this is a natural situation, not the fault of teachers or schools. They continue to be shocked at the finding that half of any group tested is below the average of the group. Human beings differ inherently in how much they learn and how rapidly they learn it. Yet we go on categorizing them by age and treating them all alike. What sense does it make to assign the same tasks to all members of an age group and expect them all to succeed equally well?

The problem has been exacerbated by the policy of "social promotion," passing children along from grade to grade regardless of what they have already learned, and finally issuing a high school diploma to anyone who sticks it out for twelve years. This policy is one fundamental cause of the frustration pupils and teachers experience. As they move up the ladder, slow students find themselves in a situation where they cannot possibly meet the requirements because they do not have the knowledge and skills upon which the more complex knowledge and skills they are expected to acquiring are based. If a child has not learned to add and subtract, how can he possibly understand multiplication and division? Fast learners, on the other hand, have forged so far ahead of their classmates that they find what goes on in the classroom excruciatingly boring, and adapt by making mischief or developing habits of laziness and daydreaming, knowing that they will get A's on examinations without doing any work. Teachers find such classrooms very difficult to control, and cannot devote their energy to their real task

of facilitating learning.

It is not the teachers or the pupils who are to blame. Most of them are doing the best that they can to function in a difficult situation. It is the "lockstep" system that is at fault. We have tried to organized schools as we organized factories, as though children were raw material to be processed. Efforts to patch up the system by providing special tutoring for the "disadvantaged" and special programs for the "gifted," expensive as they are, have not begun to solve the problem. What we need is a way of charting and facilitating each individual's progress.

The second thing wrong with public education in the United States is the high degree of compulsion it involves. This was not always so. Schools have existed in America since colonial days, and in western civilization for hundreds of years, but requiring children to attend them for a specified number of years is a very recent historical development. In the United States, the first compulsory attendance law, in Massachusetts, was not passed until 1852. Other states followed suit, but in many of them the requirement of compulsory attendance for a certain number of years is less than a century old, and the ideal of universal, compulsory secondary education is even more recent. We have no guarantee anywhere in human history that all teenagers are capable of mastering a reasonably demanding secondary school curriculum. And compulsory attendance laws have undermined the motivation on which such mastery depends. If advanced education is seen as a priceless opportunity, as it was for 19th-century immigrant families, even slow students were willing to make tremendous efforts and thus to succeed. Seen as something disagreeable to be endured until one's 16th or 18th birthday, schooling does not stimulate such effort.

It is, of course, clear that the requirements for a rewarding productive life have changed during the last century. A person who has not attained a certain level of literacy is now seriously handicapped for making his or her way in the world. This is the principal argument for compulsory education, and it is a cogent one. However, more and more research investigations are showing that our present school system is not accomplishing the purpose of producing universal literacy. Far too many individuals are still illiterate even after 10 or 12 years of compulsory education, even if they have been

awarded a high school diploma. Unfortunately, the public response to this sad fact is often to increase the compulsion--set up more stringent requirements--make courses more difficult--catch and punish the truants--stigmatize the dropouts.

Can we not find a better way? Can we not transform our American educational system into one that will really produce the results the public desires? What should really be compulsive is the literacy requirement rather than any specified number of years of school attendance. Suggestions of changes that would serve to put such a policy into effect follow:

1. Give competency tests to individuals at any age at which they are ready to take them, instead of adding them as an extra requirement for high school graduation.

2. Make primary but not secondary education compulsory, but compel each boy and girl to go to school (or be registered in some alternative program, such as home education) only until he or she can meet the basic requirements by passing the competency tests. Individual differences being as great as they are, some would take much longer than others to meet the requirement, but all would eventually be equipped for further education or employment.

3. Diversify secondary schools and make them as attractive as possible, so that students would be motivated to continue their education.

4. Organized grade schools by curriculum level rather than by age, placing each child in the grade where what he is ready and equipped by previous experience to learn is being taught. Individualize instruction within the classroom, using available technologies, and allow passage from one grade to the next whenever individuals are ready for it (or at least more frequently than once a year.)

5. Mobilize community resources to provide a wide range of educational experiences at the secondary level. Some high schools could concentrate on academic knowledge so that anyone

who wished to study literature, history, science, philosophy, mathematics, or other liberal arts courses could do so. (Notice that I am not recommending the kind of differentiation based on test scores that has been common in European school systems. But if students are to get the benefit of liberal education, the desire to learn must be present. And if we no longer insisted that all must start at the same age and learn in the same amount of time, the problem of failure would be greatly reduced or eliminated.) But the community should also provide an assortment of other possibilities, such as specialized vocational training (perhaps in community colleges), advanced training in the fine arts, and field work of many kinds. A boy or girl willing to work and able to find a job could do so. The elimination of compulsory high school attendance would not have to discharge a host of teenagers into the streets with nothing to do. Each should be engaged in learning what he or she wishes to learn.

6. Maximize educational opportunities for persons of all ages. Encourage individuals who have missed educational experiences along the way to engage in them later. (This development of adult education is well under way.) Schoolrooms should be facilitators of the educational process for everyone.

The plan I am proposing has two purposes. The first is to produce the universal literacy we see as essential, or something much nearer to it than our present educational system is producing, by placing the emphasis on achievement rather than time served, recognizing that not all learners will reach the goal in the sam amount of time. The second purpose is to enhance the motivation to learn throughout the whole educational enterprise. Good teachers leave the profession not just because of higher salaries elsewhere, but also because the management of classrooms full of rebellious, hostile pupils becomes intolerable. College students intelligent enough to enter any profession they wish avoid teaching for the same reason.

The change I have outlined here is obviously only a first step in a new direction. I recognize that carrying it out would involve enormous

complications, and that it would involve a great deal of work by a great many people to plan it in detail. But perhaps instead of continuing to struggle with the increasing costs and increasing problems of a system that psychological research shows to be basically flawed, we should begin to think about redesigning it along sounder lines. American educators developed the system we now have. They should be able to design a more effective one.